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GAINSBOROUGH

with an introduction and notes by

BASIL TAYLOR

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General Editor
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GAINSBOROUGH

With an Introduction and a Note
on each plate
by
BASIL TAYLOR

Gainsborough, though one of the world's most famous painters of portraits, was very diffident about them. 'I paint portraits', he wrote, 'for money, landscapes because I love them.' Our colour plates show therefore some landscapes as well as portraits; and Mr. Basil Taylor's text explains other facets of this engaging character who also wrote 'I am a musician because I cannot help it,' and who moved in a social world in many ways different from the scene where Reynolds triumphed.

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THE FABER GALLERY

GAINSBOROUGH

(1727–1788)

with an introduction
and notes by
Basil Taylor

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Introduction by Basil Taylor

In December, 1788, four months after Gainsborough's death at the age of 61, Sir Joshua Reynolds delivered his fourteenth Discourse before the students of the Royal Academy and devoted it, with some digressions, to his late rival. The essential themes of this discourse, as of the others, were the right principles of study in the Fine Arts and the relation between the artist and Nature. Nature was a key word of the eighteenth century; an American historian of ideas has distinguished two dozen different usages during the period. When Gainsborough was beginning his career in the 'forties, taste and opinion were ruled by the rationalist philosophy of the seventeenth century. "The knowledge of external nature and the science which that knowledge requires," Dr. Johnson said, "are not the great and frequent business of the human mind." Nature must be deprived of its local and temporal particularities and only its central and ideal form exposed. "A blade of grass," wrote Johnson at another time, "is a blade of grass in one country or another." Reason should rule over instinct and emotion. Imagination and enthusiasm were to be distrusted. Such were some of the controlling beliefs of the society into which Gainsborough was born. By his death this attitude was in dissolution and as a sign of the retreat of reason before feeling, of general nature before particular nature, I would quote some lines from Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, a poem begun a year before the century closed:

> To every natural form, rock, fruit or flower
> Even the loose stones that cover the highway
> I gave a moral life; I saw them feel
> And linked them to some feeling.

Reynolds's fourteenth discourse was a generous, if a reserved and cautionary tribute by one who had been Johnson's friend, who had lived and worked by the light of seventeenth-century theory, a tribute to a man whose instincts and preferences linked him with the new age.

Many of those artists whom we associate with the English landscape and with a natural vision of it came from the eastern counties—Gainsborough, Constable, Crome, Cotman, de Wint—if London is included, Turner and Girtin. Many of those who neglected landscape and attempted the historical picture, or at least, the Grand Manner have come from the west—Reynolds, Romney, Opie, Northcote, Lawrence, Haydon, Eastlake. I do not wish, like Havelock Ellis in his book on the British genius, to draw elaborate conclusions from this evidence, but it does make a useful symbol of Gainsborough's move westwards from Ipswich to Bath in 1759, perhaps the most decisive change in his life. For, if he was never to try History, he did there sacrifice a preference for landscape to the demand for his portraits, and if he did not, in fact, abandon landscape, his vision of nature was weakened by his changed situation.

Gainsborough was born in 1727 in the Suffolk town of Sudbury, his father being a woollen manufacturer. He certainly began to paint while he was at school and early showed his preference for landscape; it was the Suffolk country, he said, which made him a painter. In 1740 he went to London where he stayed for six years developing his talent, making portraits and landscapes, working towards the finest achievements of his youth, the small paintings of figures in landscape (represented here by the portrait of *Heneage Lloyd and his Sister*). The character and qualities of these pictures is so subtle that they could hardly have been predicted and cannot easily be explained, but certain acquaintances made in London may have contributed towards their pattern and the values they display. Gainsborough worked with the French painter and designer, Gravelot, who would certainly have introduced him to Watteau and his contemporaries. The scale of the figures and their relation with their surroundings suggest the influence of Hogarth and of the conversation pieces of Hayman and Philips. These were decisive years in the evolution of the English portrait. In the time of Lely and Kneller the portrait had been courtly, official, detached from individual, human values. At its worst it had been the crudest emblem of rank, wealth, fashionable beauty. By the 1740's its conventions were being replaced. Hogarth had brought character into portraiture as Richardson and Fielding had done in literature. Alan Ramsay was combining a natural informality with delicacy and grace; the way was open for the experiments of Reynolds and, indeed, for Gainsborough himself.

By the time Gainsborough was beginning to send pictures from Bath to the London exhibitions in the early 'sixties, Reynolds was not only established as the leading portraitist, but had proved the authority of his art and its remarkable variety. He brought to portrait painting his experience of the great masters, seen with such enthusiasm on his visit to Italy, and a powerful ambition to make some form of a marriage between portraiture, which English patronage always required, and History painting, for which the demand had never been sufficient so support those English artists who aspired to work in this, the highest sphere of art. Reynolds would often require his sitters to co-operate in this purpose of raising the status of the painter in England, by involving them in myth or allegory, and many of them out of their own taste or pretensions would willingly agree to the

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Plate 1. *Heneage Lloyd and his Sister.* See page 24

collusion, if indeed, they did not demand it. Goldsmith's Vicar of Wakefield—the date being the 1760's—desired "one large historical family piece" with each of the family drawn as "independent historical figures"—his wife as Venus, Sophia as a shepherdess, the intruding Squire as Alexander the Great, and so on. Reynolds might have contrived the picture with conviction and great competence, but Gainsborough would have had no sympathy for such a commission. As Reynolds did not fail to remind those who listened to his discourse, Gainsborough had not been instructed in the theories and methods of Renaissance and post-Renaissance picture making. He had never made the Grand Tour. He had not been brought up on the Antique. Consequently he never attempted the Historical pictures which had defeated Hogarth and which toppled some of his own contemporaries into poverty. He seldom put his people into fancy dress and he would argue with those who wished to be painted in this style. "Nothing can be more absurd," he wrote to Lord Dartmouth in 1771, "than the foolish custom of painters dressing people like scaramouches and expecting the likeness to appear"—and later in the same letter—"I have that regard for truth that I hold the finest inventions as a mere slave in comparison and believe I shall remain an ignorant fellow to the end of my days, because I never could have patience to read poetical impossibilities, the very food of a painter, especially if he intends to be knighted in this land of roast beef, so well do serious people love froth."

Poetical: In his discourse Reynolds said that Gainsborough lacked poetry, by which they both intended the habit of reinterpreting the poets in terms of paint. Inventions: Gainsborough had no great powers of invention. He generally used the most undemonstrative poses, but at his best the reality of the figure made that unimportant. And when the sitter's physical presence expressed itself in terms of a particular attitude, his sharp eye could isolate all that was most characteristic (see plates 4 and 6). Likeness was the first consideration—

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likeness and 'truth' meaning the living world, the individual human being. If the range of his designs is infinitely slighter than Reynolds's, the variety of the mood and expression in his sitters' faces is not only greater but less conventional. He was often at his best with childhood and old age, with people of spirit and temperament, actors, musicians and the demi-monde. The following words from Johnson's *The Idler* are appropriate to his portraiture—"That art which is now employed in diffusing friendships, in reviving tenderness, in quickening the affection of the absent and continuing the presence of the dead."

In our time artists and critics have valued the innocent eye, the primitive and the untrained. There has been a taste for what would once have been called the immature phase of a culture or an artist's work. It was natural that Roger Fry, one of the directors of this preference, should be most excited by Gainsborough's Suffolk portraits, that Mr. Sacheverell Sitwell in writing of *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* should say, "Never again did he rival this picture of his youth." I think we need to realise that the best portraits of his maturity, if not so 'original' or seductive, are more profound in their grasp of form and spirit. I wish that the same could be held of his landscapes, for the diffusion of his genius for landscape is one of the tragedies of English art.

While he remained in Suffolk, Gainsborough turned his observation to the most ordinary aspect of his surroundings, as Constable was to do. He found a justification for accepting the accidents and untidy particularities of nature in Dutch landscape painters of the seventeenth century, in the Ruysdaels, in Wynants, and Berchem, whose pictures he copied and repaired. But this kind of nature was not then acceptable, was not to be justified by aesthetic theory for forty years (see notes to Plates 3 and 7), and Gainsborough later told how the best of his early landscapes the *Cornard Wood* in the National Gallery, had been in the hands of twenty dealers.

In the middle 'fifties while Gainsborough was at work on such pictures, Edward Burke was dividing the visible world between the ruling categories of the Sublime, that which is obscure, powerful, vast and infinite and the Beautiful, that which is small, smooth, delicate and of a gradual variation. 'Cornard Wood' fitted neither. His later landscapes would respond to both. A year before Gainsborough left Suffolk for Bath, the first of a number-less trek of travellers and topographers were discovering the English landscape for the first time, but at this moment, the high lands of the north and west and not yet East Anglia. That the eyes of such travellers could be opened and their pens set to praising the Beauty and the Sublimity of the Lakes or the Welsh mountains was due to their previous education in the landscapes of Claude and Poussin and in the verbal landscapes of Thomson or Dyer. (The society of Bath was one way into this taste.) Such travellers, Thomas Gray the poet being one of the first of them, were accustomed to carry on their journeys a 'Claude glass' a small, dark convex mirror which could reflect the landscape, gather it together towards some degree of pictorial composition, clarify the tone values and alter nature's disconcerting irregularities into manageable conventions. The mirror helped the prospect to assume a seventeenth-century look. In this artificial eye nature was changed into art and a piece of ground as wild as Scawfell or Snowdon could be held in the palm of the hand. After his remove to Bath, Gainsborough began to see nature as if in a Claude glass.

Landscape painting became the arrangement of acceptable conventions for natural forms upon a ground plan which had also been established by precedent. Gainsborough did indeed make one tour in search of the Picturesque in 1783. "I don't know if I told you," he wrote in a letter, "that I'm going along with a Suffolk friend to visit the lakes in Cumberland and Westmorland and perhaps when I come back to show you that your Grays and Dr. Browns are tawdry fan-painters." Dr. Brown's fan was a letter on Keswick written in 1759 and published in London in 1768. But it is unlikely that any of the landscapes inspired by this visit were nearer to the individuality of the Lakes than such generalising phrases of Brown as . . . "You will find rocks and cliffs of stupendous height hanging over the lake in horrible grandeur, the woods climbing up their steep and shaggy sides . . . a variety of waterfalls are seen pouring from their summits and tumbling in vast sheets from rock to rock in rude and terrible magnificence." But always such conventions were vitalised by his nervous calligraphy, that true index of his temperament.

He called himself liberal, thoughtless and dissipated. (He was not, for other reasons as well, an ideal husband.) Uvedale Price wrote that "he was a man of an eager irritable mind, though warmly attached to those he loved; of a lively and playful imagination yet at times severe and sarcastic." That estimate as well as the tone of his disputes with the Academy suggest that like Constable he gained a certain satisfaction in being a non-conformist and an unofficial artist. He was one of the founder-members of the Academy, but was never a faithful or convinced member of it. That Gainsborough lived on the edge of his emotions is suggested by his impulsive delight in anything significant which came under his eye, his habit of being stimulated to comment upon the slightest details of nature. When Reynolds was moved to enthusiasm or anger his feelings barely ruffle the smooth surface of his reasonable prose, but the tone of Gainsborough's voice and feelings strikes off the page of his letters in the words and rhythms of conversation. "But where am I my lord this is my free opinion in another line with a witness, forgive me my lord, I am

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but a wild goose at best, all I mean is this, Lady Dartmouth's picture will look more like and not so large when dressed properly and if it does not I will begin another." The texture of such a statement might be described in the words which Reynolds used about the texture of his paint—"Those odd scratches and marks . . . this chaos, this uncouth and shapeless appearance."

When he was learning his profession in London, he made a number of models in clay of horses, cows and dogs. Modelling is commonly an art of addition, of building forms outwards from a core. The figures and other objects in the early pictures are constructed in this way, by reproducing natural structure, by following in the human body the marks of bone, joint and muscle. Figures are isolated from their surroundings by their firm outline and united with it by a unity of tone and harmony of colour. Of the later pictures it is said that he would set up his models in a dark room ("where neither they nor the pictures were scarcely visible"). Gradually he would let in more light, gradually more and more of the form would be revealed. That creation of the form from the outside is a painting by eye rather than by an applied knowledge of structure. It can only succeed if the painter has an instinctive perception of form, of the unity and continuity of the figure. When giving evidence in a lawsuit a counsel asked him "I observe you lay great stress on a painter's eye. What do you mean by that expression?" "A painter's eye is to him what a lawyer's tongue is to you." Words which the nineteenth-century critic R. A. M. Stevenson used in reference to impressionism might almost be applied to him. He was not "biased by that chief disturber of impression, the knowledge that any objects exist." With him the processes of drawing and painting were intimately connected. The strokes which a painter makes may be just a means of leaving a stain of tone or colour upon the canvas, or by their shape, size and movement they may be a means of explaining form by leading the eye over surfaces. Gainsborough painted in this way—by an accumulation of touches he drew his figures together into a total expression of mass and movement and it is with paint that he achieved his brilliant harmony between volume and texture.

Although they are not represented in these pages I must mention those 'Fancy pictures', as Reynolds called them, which Gainsborough painted in the last years of his life. They represent country characters or incidents of a kind which had inhabited his landscapes since his Ipswich days—cottage girls fetching water from the well or feeding their pigs, shepherd boys, or country families at their doorways. What had been incidental details became the central motives of compositions presented on the scale of a portrait. There is no doubt that Gainsborough was partly encouraged to attempt this genre by the example of Murillo, whose *Saint John the Baptist*, now in the National Gallery, he once owned. But his own sympathies were equally decisive. He did not only prefer the country to the town but felt particularly at home amongst those who lived there. As Uvedale Price wrote, "When we came to cottage or village scenes, to groups of children or to any objects of that kind which struck his fancy, I have often remarked in his countenance an expression of particular gentleness and complacency." (At least one of the pictures was painted from a living model, a country boy called Jack Hill.) Such subjects were to become very popular in the work of Morland, Ward and those other painters who exploited the sentimental and the picturesque attractions of country life. These paintings are also among the precursors of a whole succession of nineteenth-century idylls. The nineteenth-century painter deliberately sought to touch the spectator's emotions and to some extent in the 1780's Gainsborough was expecting a response of feeling which could hardly have been given fifty years earlier when the Abbé de Bos could write in his *Reflections:* "How shall one's attention be engaged by a picture representing a peasant driving a couple of beasts along the highway. It may possibly amuse us some moments and may even draw from us an applause of the artist's abilities in imitating, but can never raise any emotion or concern". Other writers have suggested that Gainsborough's Fancy paintings are the pictorial equivalent of Wordsworth's country stories in verse, but more important than the similarity of theme or language is the consonance of feeling. To Wordsworth poetry was "the history or science of the feelings". He chose "incidents and situations from common life" because in that condition "the immortal passions of the heart speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity". In Wordsworth's sense, Gainsborough was among the most poetical of English painters.

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Plate 2

THE PAINTER'S DAUGHTERS TEASING A CAT

London: National Gallery

29¾ × 24¾ inches

Gainsborough's daughters, Mary and Margaret, were born at his own birthplace, Sudbury, the former in 1748 and the latter in 1752. Mary, who made a most unhappy marriage (see note to Plate 6) went mad and after their mother's death in 1798, she and her sister, who was also abnormal, lived together at Acton where they died in 1826 and 1820 respectively. The years of their childhood, however, seem to have been happy. Their father writes of them with great affection and tenderness, he taught them to paint landscape (" . . . it will be employment not so apt to lay snares in their way as Portrait and Miniature painting, because they may be retired"), and they frequently posed for him. This picture is likely to have been painted soon after the family's move to Bath in 1759 and is painted in a style which lies between that of his Suffolk portraits and the work of his maturity. The faces show the tight modelling of the earlier manner, the contours are more decisive, the transition from plane to plane more abrupt than later, and the paint does not contain the forms so delicately as it came to do. The unfinished landscape points to the future, to those conventions adopted in Bath, which were to fill the backgrounds of all his subsequent portraits.

Every picture of his daughters is remarkable for the expression on the children's faces. The art theory of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries gave much importance to the study of Expression, the study, that is, of the significant movements of the features and the limbs. Conventional forms were evolved for all the dominant passions and this system had some influence upon portraiture. Gainsborough is unlikely to have studied such theories and would have gained little from them, for few portrait painters have been able to animate their sitter's features with such elusive and revealing expressions, elusive because the expression is so often about to dissolve into another. In matters of psychology he was, I believe, far in advance of his contemporaries, the writers as well as the painters.

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Plate 3

A CLASSICAL LANDSCAPE

London: National Gallery

$16\frac{3}{4} \times 21\frac{3}{8}$ inches

The most powerful influences upon the eighteenth-century vision of landscape were the painters Claude Lorrain, Nicholas and Gaspard Poussin, and Salvator Rosa. Their pictures were greedily collected by English connoisseurs and their attraction was strengthened by such poets as Thomson and Dyer who not only praised

> Whate'er Lorrain light-touch'd with softening Hue
> Or savage Rosa dashed or learned Poussin drew.

but composed their own verbal landscapes to the pattern which these painters had set. Landscape gardeners, professional and amateur, transformed parks and estates into a living image of their designs. Thousands of paintings and drawings were devised by men of talent and no talent from the conventions which their works had suggested. In moving to Bath, Gainsborough himself was immediately involved in this current and his opportunities for seeing the work of these dictators of fashion increased.

This little sketch perfectly represents the fashionable synthesis. Here are all the characteristics of Burke's category of the Beautiful informing the material of seventeenth-century landscape. It is easy to imagine the picture being contrived from those model landscapes which Gainsborough would make in his studio with broken stones, pieces of looking-glass and sprigs of broccoli. The Italianate building must have been derived from art as Gainsborough never visited Italy, but the delicacy of the handling is something beyond the experience and capacity of most of his contemporaries.

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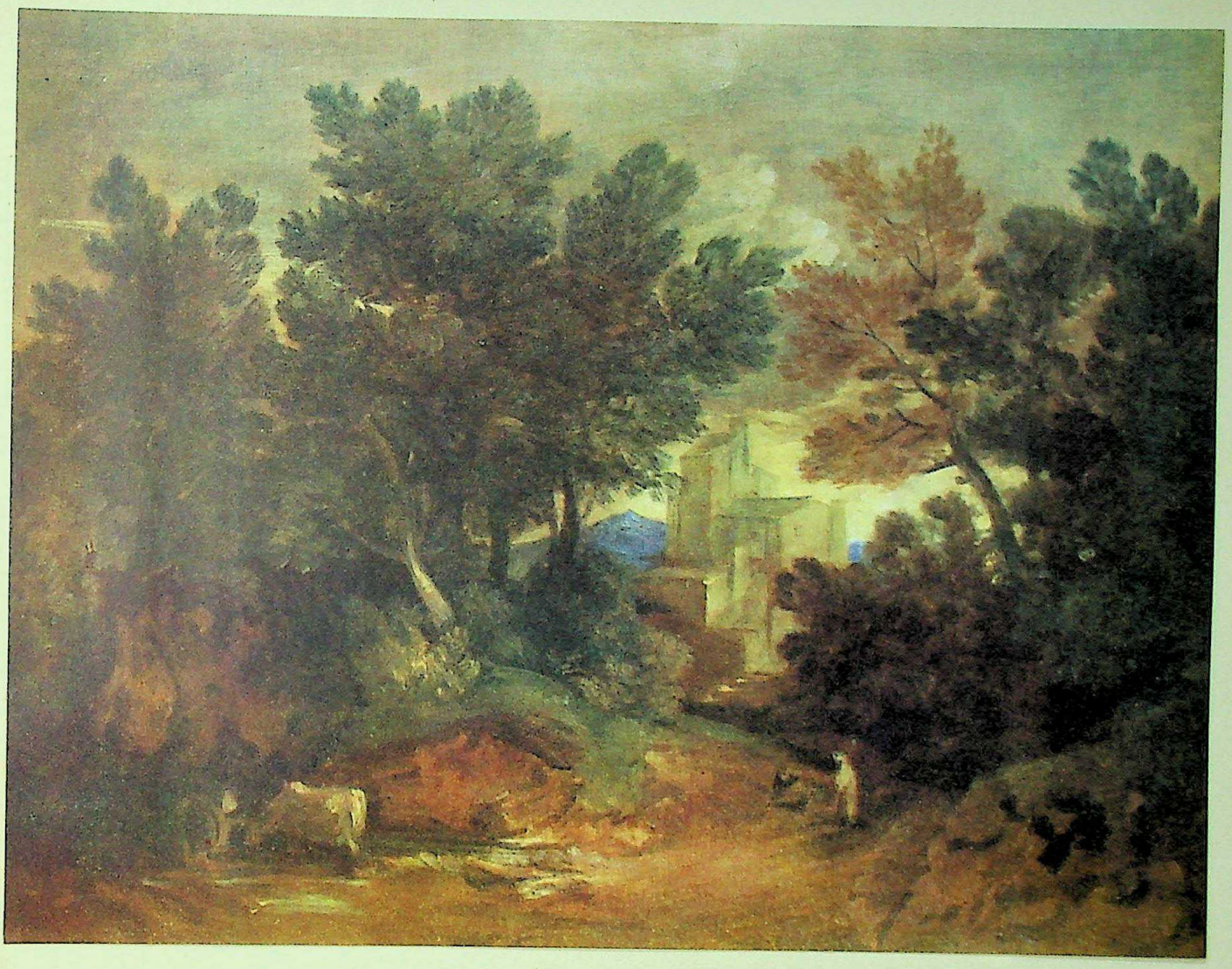

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Plate 4

JACK, VISCOUNT KILMOREY

London: National Gallery

92 × 61 inches

This picture which may have been painted in 1768 to mark John Needham's succession to his title, is one of the finest of Gainsborough's male portraits. He was not always successful in setting a figure securely on its feet, but this painting is partly the embodiment of a solid stance. As in the case of Fischer (Plate 6), the pose seems right and inevitable because it has been so intelligently derived from the sitter's physical habits, from Kilmorey's manner of expressing his temperament through his robust stature. This is a masterpiece of observation and insight, for the current tendencies would not freely have imposed such a pattern upon the portrait. No picture gives better proof of Gainsborough's ability to force a living presence upon the sight, of his instinct for what Berenson calls 'tactile values'. It brings to mind Ruskin's remark that Gainsborough's masses are "as broad as the first division of light from darkness" and as this breadth is here embodied in the most delicate and fluent paint, his accompanying statement is equally appropriate. "Gainsborough's hand is as light as the sweep of a cloud—as swift as the flash of a sunbeam." He was only at his best, indeed, when these two qualities were conjoined. When his seductive handling of paint was not directed, not disciplined by his natural sense of structure, when his concentration was diffused, it became a mannerism and imposed upon his sitters a false fragility.

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Plate 5

THE HONOURABLE MRS. GRAHAM

Edinburgh: National Gallery of Scotland

92 × 59½ inches

Mrs. Graham, a sister of the Duchess of Atholl, seems to have possessed a character and an intelligence as admirable as her beauty. Her husband was so devoted to her that her death in France in 1792 at the age of thirty-five nearly drove him out of his mind. Later he joined the Army and became one of Wellington's most brilliant generals in the Peninsular campaign. He could not bear to keep the picture as it was a reminder of his wife and sent it to a warehouse in London where it remained hidden until 1842. It was appropriate that this, a portrait of one of his most beautiful sitters, should have been exhibited at Somerset House in 1777, the year in which Gainsborough returned to the Academy after a quarrel which had kept his work off the walls for four years. This was the most triumphant moment in his career, for, on the evidence of his exhibits, the critics placed him ahead of Reynolds as the greatest painter of the day. He had begun this portrait two years earlier when he painted a half length study. A relation of Mrs. Graham then wrote, "Gainsborough has not advanced your picture a single stroke and says he has no thought of finishing it within the twelve months, if he did not add that it would be the completest of pictures, I should cry at the delay".

And certainly this is one of the most completely realised of all his portraits. The complicated expression of the drapery never threatens the presence of the figure, because both form and texture are united in one element, in the abstract calligraphy of the paint. Gainsborough never applied the conventional device of turning the head with such ease and conviction and the whole figure expresses a movement which is real but undefinable. If the portrait seems an idealisation of feminine beauty, of that spirited elegance and sensibility which we like to attribute to the eighteenth century and which very few in that time can have displayed, that is perhaps because Mrs. Graham was too beautiful to be quite real.

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Plate 6

JOHANN CHRISTIAN FISCHER

London: Collection of H.M. the King

89½ × 58½ inches

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Like many other painters—Titian, Ingres, Klee are examples—Gainsborough was a devoted musician and played upon the violin, the viol-da-gamba and keyboard instruments. His contemporaries did not agree about his talent, but when the composer and player, Karl Friedrich Abel gave him a viol-da-gamba, Gainsborough's patron, Sir Henry Bate Dudley said that "He touched that instrument with most exquisite skill, truth and expression; and in an adagio movement or largo, his richness of tone, expression and feeling brought him very near indeed to Abel's standard." His first biographer, Philip Thicknesse, records that when, about 1753, he lent the painter a violin, "he had as much taste for music as he had for painting, though he had never then touched a musical instrument, but before I got my fiddle home again he had made such a proficiency in music that I would have soon as painted against him as to have attempted to fiddle against him." He seems to have belonged to a musical club in Ipswich and there is a record of a lost painting of a musical party which he presented to his father on leaving the town in 1759. He found Bath a place where he could develop his interest not only through listening and playing but by contact with the distinguished musicians who visited or lived in the city. He met Johann Christian Bach, Abel, Giardini the fiddler, and William Jackson the composer and organist. He was intimate with the Linley family—Thomas Linley being the leader of Bath's musical life—and he painted their portraits. One of his first jobs in coming to London in 1774 was to assist in decorating the music room in which Abel and J. C. Bach were to hold some of the most famous London concerts of the century.

The subject of this portrait, the oboist and composer Johann Christian Fischer, was a frequent visitor to the Gainsboroughs' home in Bath, and in 1780, the year in which the picture was exhibited in the Royal Academy, Fischer married his elder daughter Mary against her father's wishes. "The notice I had of it was very sudden," Gainsborough wrote to his sister "as I had not the least suspicion of this attachment," and indeed the marriage was not successful, lasting only a year or two.

In this, one of the most fascinating of the artist's portraits, Fischer's relaxed pose is in reality a very complicated pattern of thrusts and tensions, but these have been perfectly resolved and there is no weakness anywhere in the continuity of forms. In the face, Gainsborough's nervous paint suggests the most delicate balance of thought and sensation. Indeed, if a contemporary was right in thinking Fischer "no more intelligent than an hautboy", then the painter has grossly flattered his son-in-law.

The piano forte, incidentally, bears the name of Joseph Merlin, a member of Gainsborough's musical circle and the subject of another portrait.

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Plate 7

THE WATERING PLACE

London: Tate Gallery

58 × 71 inches

Like the portrait of Mrs. Graham, this picture was exhibited at the Royal Academy in Gainsborough's triumphal year, 1777. Horace Walpole described it then as being "in the style of Rubens, and by far the finest landscape ever painted in England, and equal to the great masters." Gainsborough certainly knew and admired Rubens—he recommended his friend Garrick to go and see a landscape by that artist—but this painting is, in its mood and construction, closer to the classical landscapes of Gaspard Poussin and Claude. It is derived from the same sources as Plate 3, and it shares with that sketch such conventional details as the blue mountain seen through the trees. If we follow Walpole's suggestion and compare the picture with Ruben's *The Watering Place* in the National Gallery it is easy to see what such a typical eighteenth-century conception could lack: the energy of natural growth, the powerful particularities of rock and branch and leafage, above all the recreation of the spaces and intervals of landscape. Earlier in his life, in Suffolk, Gainsborough had attended to such things; the expression of space, light and texture in the present painting is elementary in comparison with the problems faced if not altogether solved in the *Cornard Wood*.

But accepting this limitation of vision and design, the picture has such a unity of light and mood, is so fluently painted that its conventions are given a reality and depth attained in few eighteenth-century landscapes. In fact, the comment of an Italian visitor to the Academy in the year of its exhibition at least places the emphasis where most critics would today: "The scene is grand, the effect of lighting is striking, the cattle very natural. But what shall I say of the pencilling? I really do not know; it is so new, so original, that I cannot find words to convey any idea of it. I do not know that any artists, living or dead, have managed their pencils in that manner and I am afraid that any attempt to imitate it will be attended with ill success."

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Plate 8

SKETCH FOR 'PERDITA'

Windsor: Collection of H.M. the King

29½ × 24½ inches

(Reproduced by gracious permission of His Majesty)

The sitter for this portrait, Mary Robinson, had one of the most romantic and adventurous careers of the eighteenth century demi-monde. Born Mary Darby in 1758, she made an unhappy marriage when she was fifteen with a Mr. Robinson. Between 1776 and 1779 she enjoyed a successful stage career and it was when she was playing the role of Perdita in *The Winter's Tale* that she attracted the attention of the Prince of Wales, later George IV, who was then eighteen years old. At the Prince's request she gave up the stage, but after two years, attachment to her Florizel, the Prince abandoned her and she became the mistress of Colonel Tarleton. When he was forced to seek refuge abroad from his creditors she drove by night to the port of embarkation with money she had borrowed, and the chill she caught led to an attack of rheumatism from which she never recovered. In 1786 when she was, in fact, abroad on a cure, the London papers announced her death and published scandalous stories in what they believed to be her obituaries. She died in 1800 in poverty despite a pension granted to her by the Prince. In her later years she took to literature, was a friend of Coleridge, and became successful enough to be known as 'our British Poetess'. This picture is the sketch for the painting now in the Wallace Collection which Perdita was forced to sell and which was eventually acquired by the Prince. He may have bought this painting from Gainsborough's widow.

This sketch recalls Reynolds' comment on Gainsborough's "manner of forming all the parts of the picture together; the whole going on at the same time, in the same manner as nature creates her works", for the picture has the unity of a single controlled gesture. It is painted like a watercolour and one can imagine the artist, as his daughter reports he was accustomed to do, painting it from a palette brimming with turpentine.

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Plate 9

THE MARKET CART

London: National Gallery

72½ × 60¼ inches

The *Market Cart* was completed in 1787, the year before Gainsborough's death. This subject, like others which embody the common routines of country life—the *Harvest Wagon*, for example, and *The Watering Place*, had recurred constantly in his paintings and drawings since the Suffolk period. This picture may have derived from an actual place, possibly at Lulworth in Dorset which he visited in 1786, but whether or not this is so, there is at least an appearance of observed truth in its configuration and details which is absent from Plates 3 and 7, though the blue hill is still there to establish a conventional distance beyond the calculated recession of the path. The complexity of light, surface and texture in the trees and the ground give the picture a quality which would then have been called Picturesque. This category of appearances was added to Burke's Sublime and Beautiful by Gainsborough's friend, Uvedale Price, who defined its characteristics as roughness, sudden variation and irregularity. Without forcing the comparison it is interesting to set beside the picture the following passage from Price's "Dialogue on the Distinct Characters of the Picturesque and the Beautiful."

"A hollow lane on the opposite side of the common: the banks were high and steep, and the soil being sand mixed with stone had crumbled away in many places from among the junipers, heath and furze which with some thorns and a few knotted and pollarded yews clothed the sides."

That scene was counted picturesque and, like the present picture, the theory emphasised light and colour. So it is not surprising that Turner should praise, in the following words, Gainsborough's similar picture *The Cottage Door* which "may be esteemed as possessing truth of form, expression, full-toned depth of colour, and expertness of touch carrying with it the character of vigorous and decaying foliage."

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Plate 10

MASTER HEATHCOTE

Formerly London: Collection of Lord Michelham

50 × 40 inches

There is a story that this portrait was painted by Gainsborough while he was on holiday in Bath. The parents of Master Heathcote, a little boy of four years old, had lost their other children in a serious epidemic and were anxious to secure a portrait of their remaining son. Gainsborough had at first refused the commission, but on hearing of these circumstances, he asked Mrs. Heathcote if he might see the boy and when, on the following day, the child was brought to him simply dressed in a plain white muslin frock with a blue sash, he is supposed to have said, "You have brought him simply dressed. Had you paraded him in fancy costume, I would not have painted him." Whether or not the story is true, the remark is at least in character, appropriate to his assured candour and to his impatience with anything which might distract from a portrait's likeness. When Gainsborough became a fashionable artist, he did not cease to respect the integrity of children. They are always presented as human beings and never as sentimental symbols of innocence or mischief. He applied to them the same sharp observation which informed the portraits of a Fischer or a Kilmorey.

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Note on Plate 1

HENEAGE LLOYD AND HIS SISTER

Cambridge: Fitzwilliam Mus.

25 × 31½ inches

This is one of that small group of Suffolk portraits in which Gainsborough achieved a lyrical association of figures and natural scenery hardly equalled by any other painter between Watteau and the Impressionists. They synthesise the three most typical forms of English eighteenth-century painting—a portrait, the conversation piece and the landscape, and might, if they had been recognised in their time, have augmented the possibilities of all three. The present picture does not represent such a perfect balance of these three elements as some of the others, in particular the *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*.[1] Certainly Gainsborough never painted better portraits of children. The lake and distant landscape to the left is a lovely detail luminous and suggestive. Between these two passages, however, there is an unfortunate piece of clumsiness in the balustrade and the tree which is so incoherently joined to it. This is a sign not only of immaturity but of the weakness of Gainsborough's pictorial invention, for this feature had to be contrived, while the other excellencies had been observed.

In all the pictures of this period, local colours—the red of the boy's breeches here for example—are not disturbed by the nervous broken touch which was to be so important a part of the later portraits. This red speaks with a different, sharper brightness from the red of Kilmorey's waistcoat. The forms, for all their exquisite delicacy, are more lightly, indeed more conventionally modelled and the transitions from plane to plane more abrupt than in the work of Gainsborough's maturity.

[1] Reproduced in R. H. Wilenski's 'English Painting'; another of the series, *Mr. and Mrs. Brown*, is reproduced in Faber Gallery; 'English Outdoor Paintings'.

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